Understanding The Role of Memorable Tourism Experiences in Loyalty at Giant Panda Conservation Centre, Zoo Negara Malaysia

Poh Yee Thoo, Shazali Johari, Mohd Hafizal Ismail, Lai Ling Yee

Abstract: Memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) have recently emerged to become an important study for tourism destinations to compete in this rapid growing marketplace. Unlike visitors' loyalty, it has always been a vital objective of service providers. Positive MTEs have been hypothesized for being able to develop future behavioral intentions in the visitors such as revisiting a destination. There is currently still lack of studies regarding the relationship between these two dimensions especially at Giant Panda Conservation Centre (GPCC) in Zoo Negara Malaysia which was established in year 2014. GPCC is the enclosure of the two giant pandas loaned to Malaysia by China to mark the 40th Anniversary Diplomatic Relationship between the two countries. For GPCC, loyal visitors and also new visitors are crucial as the giant pandas will be here for 10 years. Therefore, this research examines whether MTEs can affect a visitor's loyalty at GPCC in Zoo Negara. A quantitative method was used with a sample of 217 visitors and multiple regression analysis was carried out. The results showed that MTEs have a significant relationship with visitors loyalty. In a nutshell, it is essential for GPCC's management to increase positive visitors' MTEs in order to increase the number of loyal visitors who will revisit GPCC and provide positive Word of Mouth to their family and friends so that they will help to attract more new visitors.

Keywords: memorable tourism experience, loyalty, zoo negara, giant panda, behavioural intentions

I. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing number of wildlife-based tourism destinations around the world, it has emerged as a leading foreign exchange earner worldwide. The types of setting for wildlife-based tourism are comprised of either captive or non-captive. Captive setting is a site where animals are enclosed such as zoos, wildlife centres, safari parks and aquariums. In contrast, non-captive setting is a site where animals are in their natural habitats such as national parks and ecotourism areas. In Malaysia, zoo is the most easily accessed place for people to observe wildlife. There are three main zoos in Malaysia which are Zoo Negara in Kuala Lumpur, Zoo Melaka in Melaka and Zoo Taiping in Perak. All these three zoos are managed by different entities which are the non-governmental organization for Zoo Negara, private sector for Zoo Melaka and city council for Zoo Taiping.

Since there are more and more wildlife centres in Malaysia, zoos are being threatened as wildlife tourism destinations even though they consist of the widest range of wildlife. In 2014, Zoo Negara has been chosen to house two giant pandas instead of Putrajaya's Wetlands Park as it is well-equipped in terms of facilities provided and well-trained staffs to care for the giant pandas.Therefore, a Giant Panda Conservation Centre (GPCC) was established in Zoo Negara as being the enclosure for the giant pandas (Yee, Ramachandran, Shuib, Johari & Afandi, 2018).Being highly dependable on visitors' revenue especially management by NGO where there are limited budget, visitors' loyalty are indeed very important for the zoos in order to survive for the coming years of growing competitions. According to tourism marketing point of view, retaining repeat visitors to a tourism destination is more cost-effective than attracting new visitors (Meleddu, Paci & Pulina, 2015).According to Malaysian Zoological Society's Giant Panda Conservation Centre and Veterinary Services Director Dr. Mat Naim Ramli, the total number of visitors in year 2015 was the lowest number in the last 20 years even after the establishment of GPCC in year 2014 (The Star, 2016).

Visitors' loyalty has been a powerful tool in tourism marketing as it helps a destination to retain their visitors and also attract more new visitors. Enhancing visitors' loyalty at a destination and managing visitors' service satisfaction effectively have been addressed by marketing practitioners (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996).Through destination loyalty, the costs for marketing can be reduced as loyal visitors will help to recommend the destination to others by providing positive word-of-mouth (WOM) and revisiting the destination again willingly (Meleddu, Paci & Pulina, 2015). In addition, with the current technology, most people will share their experiences at a particular destination through their social networking websites where positive words from them are very crucial to the destination. Research shows good quality of services, visitors' high satisfaction and positive memorable tourism experiences are some of the elements that can influence visitors' loyalty towards a destination (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006; Ali, Hussain & Ragavan, 2014; Baker & Crompton, 2000).

In the current tourism research and management, the memorable tourism experience (MTE) concept has become a focal point. This concept has gained much attention over the years since the appearance of experience economy by Pine and Gilmore (1998).

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Research has showed that visitors' positive memorable experiences will result in revisiting a destination and spreading positive WOM (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Some destination operators have credited memorable experiences as being fundamental to competitiveness and sustainability (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

The relationship between experiences and loyalty has been studied by various authors in different settings (Ali, Hussain & Ragavan, 2014; Baker & Crompton, 2000; Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; King, 2002; Thomas & Earl, 1995; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon & Diener, 2003; Wu, 2016; Wu, 2017). Baker and Crompton (2000) had proven that satisfaction on quality of the experience influences behavioural intentions for an annual festival. Furthermore, Ali, Hussain and Ragavan (2014) tested on four dimensions of customer experience at resort hotels namely educational experience, entertainment experience, esthetic experience and escapism experience where all the dimensions significantly influence customer loyalty. According to Wu (2016), visitors' previous experience positively influences destination loyalty. Apart from that, Wu (2017) found that leisure experience has a positive impact on loyalty intention among the visitors of corporate museum.

Despite experiences have been conceptualized to be closely related with destination loyalty (Chi, 2012; Oppermann, 2000), there is a relatively less attention being paid to memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) dimension (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015; Kim et al., 2012). MTEs is found to be positively influences behavioural intentions (Kim & Ritchie, 2014), and it can give positive impact on attracting new visitors as visitors tend to recommend MTEs to others (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013). Therefore, these studies have revealed that MTEs construct is still needed to be further examined with visitor's loyalty as it would greatly assist destination managers on developing managerial actions aimed at increasing loyal behaviours.

For Zoo Negara or specifically Giant Panda Conservation Centre (GPCC), loyal visitors and also new visitors are crucial as the giant pandas will be here for 10 years. In order to do so, a sustainable competitive advantage that can help GPCC to outperform its competitors from the MTE's7 dimensions needs to be identified so that the management of GPCC can deliver not only good quality of service but also unique, extraordinary and memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) which can help to create loyal visitors.Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the relationship between MTEs and visitor's loyalty at GPCC in Zoo Negara Malaysia.

II. METHOD & MATERIALS

Study Area

Giant Panda Conservation Centre (GPCC) is a centre in Zoo Negara where the enclosure of Fu Wa and Feng Yi is located. This centrehad started its construction in July 2013 and completed in December 2013. This enclosure's design is to imitate the giant pandas' original home in China, and all the required facilities to care and maintain for the two giant pandas are featured in this centre (Thoo & Johari, 2016).GPCC is one of the biggest conservation programs being carried out in Malaysia (Ashaari& Johari, 2016).This

centre was launched by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, on 25th of June 2014. During the opening ceremony, the Prime Minister announced the two giant pandas' new local names, Xing Xing for the male (Fu Wa) while Liang Liang for the female (Feng Yi). The centre was officially opened to the public on 28th of June 2014. Currently, for Malaysians, the entrance fees to GPCC are included in the Zoo Negara's entrance fees which are RM 44 per adult (RM 21 for senior citizen 60 years and above) and RM 16 per child (free admission for kids below 36 months).

Study Framework

In order to analyse and categorize the study of memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) towards loyalty, a conceptual framework was developed. A number of studies have proven that there are positive relationship between visitors' memorable experiences and loyalty (Ali, Hussain & Ragavan, 2014; Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon & Diener, 2003; King, 2002; Thomas & Earl, 1995).
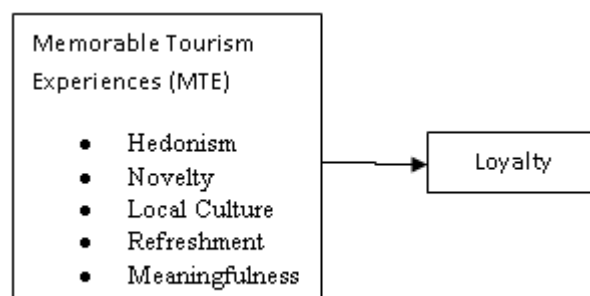

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of this study

The left section of the model illustrates the independent variable by MTEs adapted from Kim et al. (2012) model, whereas, the right sectionthe model illustrates the dependent variable by Loyalty adapted from Chi and Qu (2008). The seven dimensions of MTE are proposed as the influencing factors of visitor's destination loyalty towards GPCC.

MTEs contained 7 dimensions with 24 items. The 7 dimensions are Hedonism, Novelty, Local Culture, Refreshment, Meaningfulness, Involvement and Knowledge. Hedonism means the pleasurable feelings that excite oneself, for example, I was thrilled about having a new experience. Novelty is a psychological feeling of newness resulted from having a new experience, for example, I had once-in-a-lifetime experience. Local Culture means the interaction experience with locals, for example, I met many friendly visitors. Refreshment is the state of being refreshed, for example, I relieved stress during this visit. Meaningfulness means having a great value or significance, for example, I felt that I did something meaningful. Involvement means that people remember the experience personally relevant and meaningful, for example, I enjoyed activities which I really wanted to do. Knowledge means information, facts, or experiences known by an individual, for example, I gained a lot of information during this visit.

Loyalty contained 3 dimensions with 9 items. The 3 dimensions are revisit intention, intention to recommend and high tolerance for price premium where the 9 items are created from it. For examples:
1)   I will be interested to visit GPCC again.
2)   I will recommend GPCC to my family members.
3)   I will continue to visit GPCC even if the price increases.

Sampling and Analysis

In this study, purposive sampling was used for the data collection where the sample will focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest only. So, only visitors who are aged 18 and above, had visited GPCC, head of a group and a mixture of international and local visitors as well as a mixture of high and low season visitors were chosen as the sample of this study.It is an efficient and practical tool when being used properly, and it can be as effective as random sampling (Dolores & Tongco, 2007). The data was collected at the ending point of GPCC which is at their resting area.

A pilot survey had also been carried out with 40 samples before the actual survey. According to Hill and Lewicki (2006), the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient estimate for the instrument and subscale will be acceptable and reach the target reliability of at least 0.7, since the Cronbach's Alpha for the memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) with 24 items was 0.986 while the Cronbach's Alpha for the loyalty with 16 items was 0.955, so the instrument for both the dimensions were acceptable and reliable.

The data was analysed using the SPSS IBM version Statistics 23. The measurement for memorable MTEs andvisitors' loyalty was measured using the mean and the percentage obtained from all the attributes. All the levels were measured using Likert scale. For MTE and visitors' loyalty, the chosen Likert scale is ranged from 1 to 5. This scale reduces the confusion or time delays in providing a range which is effective for evaluation (Lawton, 2005). The Likert scale used is stated as below:

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

Multiple regression analysis which is a statistical analytical tool used to estimate the causal relationship between variables was carried out. It focuses more on the relationship between a dependent variable with other independent variables. In this case, the relationship is the MTE factors that affect the visitors'loyalty level towards GPCC.
The regression model used is
(1) $Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \ldots + \beta_s X_m + u,$

where

Y =   dependent variable (overall level of visitors' loyalty)
X_m =   independent variables
α =   constant
β_s =   coefficients
u =   error term

The confidence interval that will be used in this analysis is 95% confidence interval with t-value of 1.96, which means any value falls between P-value < 0.05 and t-value > 1.96 will be accepted as significant. F test, coefficient of multiple determination (R^2) and Beta (standardised regression coefficients) will be used to determine the significance of the model, the explanatory power of the model and strength of the independent variables towards the dependent variables.

III.   RESULTS

The R^2 obtained from this model in Table 2was 0.648 which indicates that the independent variables in the model accounts for approximately 65% of the variation in the level ofloyalty. This means that there are still 35% unexplained amount of variation which may be caused by other factors which are not covered in this study such as service quality and satisfaction. Based on Wittink (1988), in order to determine the quality and usefulness of a regression analysis result, R^2 value is usually the foundation.

At the five-percent level, the critical F-value equals 2.14 ($F_{6,210}$). Thus, at least one of the 7 parameters was different from zero because the F-value obtained was 55.039 which were greater than the critical F-value. Therefore, the F-test for this model was significant. The proportion of the variation explained is higher than the proportion of the variation which is unexplained. Since the p-value for this model was 0.000, it was highly significant at 0.01 level.

The results suggested that only four variables have slope coefficients that were statistically significant (based on the t-values and p-values).Therefore, the final model of the study using the General Linear Model,

Loyalty   =   0.093 + 0.214 Hedonism + 0.290 Local Culture + 0.243 Involvement

The factors that affect visitors' overall loyalty level towards GPCC among the MTE dimensions are hedonism, local culture and involvement.

The t-values in the regression analysis could be used to explain the relative importance of the independent variables (the MTE dimensions) in contributing to the variance in the dependent variable (visitors' overall loyalty). As far as the relative impacts of the four dimensions is concerned, local culture (t = 4.237, p = 0.000) carries the strongest predictors, followed by involvement (t = 3.591, p = 0.000) and hedonism (t = 2.793, p = 0.006). The higher is the t-value of the variable, the greater is the significance relative to the other variable.

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Table 1: The Multiple Regression Analysis results of Relationship between Memorable Tourism Experience and Loyalty

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		t - value	p- value
	B	Std. Error		
(Constant)	0.093	0.190	0.492	0.623
Hedonism	0.214	0.077	2.793	0.006
Novelty	0.049	0.059	0.837	0.403
Local Culture	0.290	0.069	4.237	0.000
Refreshment	0.101	0.069	1.471	0.143
Meaningfulness	-0.051	0.072	-0.715	0.476
Involvement	0.243	0.068	3.591	0.000
Knowledge	0.103	0.071	1.451	0.148

Note: Significant at t-value > 1.96 and p-value < 0.05 (5% level)
F= 55.039, Sig.=0.000, R^2 = 0.648 and Adjusted R^2 = 0.637

IV. DISCUSSIONS

The memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) with factors of hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge are positively associated with loyalty, which in this case the visitors' loyalty towards Giant Panda Conservation Centre (GPCC). Three of the seven factors (hedonism, local culture and involvement) were resulted to be statistically significant from the analysis. All these accounts about 65% of the total factors that can influence the loyalty which, surprisingly, a very high percentage and it shows that MTEs is indeed is a very important factor in order to develop loyal visitors.

Since local culture (t = 4.237, p = 0.000) carries the strongest predictors, it means that this factor is the most important factor from MTEs that influence the visitors' destination loyalty towards GPCC in Zoo Negara. In this case, local culture refers to the interaction between the visitors with the visitors themselves and also the staffs of GPCC and Zoo Negara.Therefore, this shows that the staffs and visitors of GPCC and Zoo Negara as a whole are important components that will create positive MTEsfor the visitors that help them to become loyal to GPCC and Zoo Negara. This result supports previous research that visitors who have good interaction with local culture will eventually build a unique and memorable experience and obtained high level of loyalty (Kim, 2010; Kim & Ritchie, 2014). Kim (2010) supported this as they found that visitors who had experienced positive local culture during their previous travel experiences will positively to have high levels of remembrance of their previous experiences which will collectively add to the current knowledge that will decide whether they are going to visit a place or not. In addition, Chandralal and Valenzuela (2015) also supported this and mentioned that maintaining good interactions with one another within the tour is an essential element of MTEs and local hospitality plays an important role in MTEs.Murray, Foley and Lynch (2010) highlighted that the attitudes, enterprise, innovation, competencies,hospitality and friendliness of the people are essential attributes in a tourism product offering, and stated that the heart of a visitor experience lies within the interactions of the visitor with the local people.

The next important factor of MTEs is involvement (t = 3.591, p = 0.000) which means that the involvement of visitors with the activities being carried out in GPCC are important MTE that will influence theirloyalty.Marketing researchers also supported this positive relationship between involvement and loyalty as it introduces the perception of visitor's personal attachment to a destination area (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Alexandris, Kouthouris & Meligdis, 2006). As involvement of the visitorsto a destination is the fundamental and core element to the existence of a tourism destination (Woodside& Lysonski, 1989), it is not surprising that the second most important factor is involvement. Previous researchers(Bloch & Richins, 1983; Blodgett & Brainbois, 1992; Swinyard, 1993) also foundthat a visitor's involvement with travel experiences will significantly increase the visitor's past MTEs. Kim (2010) identified that the level of involvement of a visitor will increase the visitor's ability to remember the past MTEs and retrieve them clearly.

Lastly,hedonism (t = 2.793, p = 0.006) is also one of the factors that will increase the GPCC's visitors loyalty. This finding is also consistent with the previous studies that hedonism has a significant role in determining their future behaviour such as destination loyalty (Dunman & Mattila, 2005; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Otto & Ritchie, 1996).In tourism experience, hedonism is an integral part of it as visitors normally seek for amusement, enjoyment, fantasy, fun, arousal and sensory stimulationduring their vacation (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). While most of the visitors must have encountered stress during their daily routine at workplace, they would definitely prefer to obtain stress-relieving and happy experiences during their holidays.

This result is consistent with Kim and Ritchie's (2014) study where they found memorable tourism experience positively influenced behavioural intentions. This study used the same 7 constructs as them namely hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement and knowledge. However, the results obtained for this study were slightly different from their study where novelty and refreshment were significantly affecting behavioural intention in their study but not in this study. InChandralal and Valenzuela (2013) study, the results show that even though the visitors have high memorable tourism experience, the visitors stated that they neither revisited those destinations nor they will revisit them again in the near future, but they affirmed that they usually recommend such memorable trips and destinations to others.This study also supports all the other previous studies that visitors' memories had positive and significant impact on visitor loyalty in different tourism industries such as resort hotel sectors, cruise ship, bed and breakfast and wine (Ali et al., 2014; Hosany & Whitnam, 2009; Oh et al., 2007; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013).

Furthermore, the results of this study are consistent with results obtained by Kim et al. (2010) where only hedonism, involvement and local culture components of MTE positively affect behavioural intentions. Moreover, it also shows that not only Pine and Gilmore's 1998 four realms (4Es -entertainment, education, aesthetic and escapism) can impact on visitors' memories and loyalty(Ali et al., 2014; Hosany & Whitnam, 2009; Oh et al., 2007; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013), but also that the MTE constructs based on Kim et al.'s (2012) can also provide the similar results in determining loyalty.

V. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell,the delivery of positive memorable experiences is essential in order to increase the number of loyal visitors of a destination in this highly competitive world. This study successfully shows that there is a significant relationship between memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) towards loyalty. It shows that the higher the positive MTEs provided by a service provider, the higher the chances of visitors to become loyal to the destination. This study which tested and validated the MTE model atGiant Panda Conservation Centre (GPCC) in Zoo Negara, a wildlife destination setting,can be valuable to its managers and other destinations' managers in different perspectives.For managerial implications, GPCC's manager should allocate their funds to develop more marketing strategies and effective programs by focusing on these seven MTE dimensions especially the three significant factors (local culture, involvement and hedonism) as these dimensions have been tested to be very influential to GPCC visitors' destination loyalty. For example, local culture and involvement as the top two strongest factors should be taken care of seriously by the GPCC's managers. Since local culture being the experience of interaction between the visitors and staffs, the GPCC's managers should educate their staffs with visitors' management so that they are well-trained to give the best service to the visitors and maintain their friendliness attitude in any situation occurred.Next, involvement being the visitors' personal experience in the activities which they feel meaningful, so GPCC's managers should review their programs there and try to implement more interactive activities for the visitors so that they can personally experience something and have more involvement and interaction with the staffs and visitors there. Activities such as interpretive talk about the giant pandas by the GPCC's staff as a tour guide with video presentation about the giant pandas together with Questions and Answers session and alsophoto and caption contest in GPCCcan be taken into consideration by GPCC's managers as it might give the visitors a fun interaction with GPCC's staffs that can enhance their MTEs at GPCC.Apart from that, loyalty programs for adults and children such as membership card that provides discount for entrance fees, food and beverages, souvenirs and birthday month special should be implemented so that the relationship between Zoo Negara and visitors will be bonded. Therefore, destination managers should really create, design, and deliver MTEs sincerely to their visitors in order to obtain visitors' loyalty who will at least provide positive Word of Mouth to their family and friends which will help them to attract more new visitors automatically.

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